

THE CONCEPT OF MAINTENANCE IN TRAINING

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In all facets of dog training there are skills a dog learns and retains and then there are training concepts that seem to require constant reinforcement. It is important that a trainer recognizes which behaviors will need maintenance and why. It is as if certain things a dog learns he knows forever and others break down simply by asking for the behaviors.

The more I work with dogs, the more I realize how much they tend to anticipate. In fact, we say that a dog has not really learned something until he anticipates it. For many years I heard the belief that if you give a verbal command following a hand signal that the dog will learn to wait for the verbal command. This is totally untrue. Dogs do not wait, they anticipate! Think of start lines in agility or finishes in obedience. Dogs must be taught to wait because their natural inclination is to anticipate the next command or action.

The exercise that brings this concept to the forefront in obedience is the Broad Jump. In agility, anticipation damages performance when a handler "peels off" weavepoles, chutes and contacts. Let's consider the broad jump first.

Whenever a dog is asked to jump a broad jump in the obedience ring he is required to turn sharply back towards the handler. After a few repetitions, the dog begins to anticipate this turn which, if left untreated, leads eventually to cutting the corner of the jump. Constant maintenance is required to keep the dog jumping straight across the jump. For more information on how to maintain the broad jump, refer to my book *Beyond Basic Dog Training*, third edition. (Howell 2003).

In agility, there are many situations where a dog's anticipation of where the handler is going next, will cause an improper obstacle performance. "Peeling off" refers to a situation where the handler begins running with the dog near an obstacle but as the dog executes the obstacle, the handler gets further and further away from the dog, in an effort to show the dog where he is going next. Each time the handler makes use of this handling technique the obstacle performance weakens as the dog begins to anticipate where he will be going next. Left unmanaged, this causes dogs to pop out of weave poles early, get tangled in chutes and miss contacts. If the handler is aware enough to maintain the performance, these errors can be avoided.

To maintain good contacts and weave pole performance when a handler must "peel off," away from the obstacle, reward the dog in practice by throwing a motivator (food tube or toy) straight ahead of the dog. This helps the dog understand that even though his handler is moving laterally, it is to the dog's advantage to continue straight ahead to claim his reward. In other words, to prevent the dog from anticipating a sharp turn towards his handler, we encourage him to anticipate a reward landing directly in front of him.

Anytime courses have required me to "peel off" weave poles or contacts over the weekend, I make sure to include maintenance training the next week to strengthen the dog's willingness to drive straight ahead and complete the entire obstacle.

The chute is another obstacle that requires frequent maintenance. If you repeatedly call a dog, asking for a sharp turn out of a chute, the dog begins to anticipate and will turn early in the chute. This is dangerous because if left unmanaged, the dog runs the risk of getting tangled going through the chute material. To maintain a straight forward run through the chute, reward the dog by throwing a reward directly ahead of the chute a few times. This is usually all it takes to remind the dog that the correct performance is running straight through the chute. Remember, if you have a weekend of trials where you have been required to call a dog abruptly out of the chute, you are going to need maintenance training the next week.

Once a trainer realizes which skills become weakened with performance, it is easy to keep performances on a trained dog, accurate and fast. Do not wait for things to break down, maintain them!